DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 127 655 95 EA 007 271

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TITLE PR for School Board Members. A Guide for Members of Boards of Education and School Administrators to Improve and Strengthen School Information Programs. Volume 8: AASA Executive Handbook Series. ERIC/CEM State-of-the-Knowledge Series, Number Thirty-Three.
INSTITUTION American Association of School Administrators, Washington, D.C.; Oregon Univ., Eugene. ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 76
CONTRACT OEC-0-8-080353-3514
NOTE 74p.
AVAILABLE FROM American Association of School Administrators, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209 (Stock No. 021-00458, $2.50, quantity discounts, orders for $15.00 or less must be accompanied by payment in full and add $1.00 for handling and postage)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$3.50 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Board of Education Policy; *Boards of Education; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Community Involvement; Conflict Resolution; Elementary Secondary Education; Information Dissemination; Literature Reviews; News Media; Publicize; *Public Relations; *School Community Relationship

ABSTRACT

A majority of the people in the United States believe school boards are doing an inadequate job of informing them about board activities, according to a 1975 survey. This handbook is intended to inform school boards of the need for effective communication and to offer suggestions for establishing constructive contact with the public and with school personnel. All board communication efforts should be centered around a board communications policy that identifies avenues of communication and specifies who will be responsible for what communication functions. Copies of this policy should be made available to all school district employees, advisory committees, and all other organizations that have a special (even if temporary) relationship with the schools. This review of the literature on school public relations includes sections on board meetings, the news media, internal and external district publications, how to obtain feedback from the community, handling crises and controversies, and obtaining information. (Author/DS)

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PR for School Board Members

A Guide for Members of Boards of Education and School Administrators to Improve and Strengthen School Information Programs

Volume VIII
AASA Executive Handbook Series

by
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Frank Grazian
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Prepared for the ERIC Clearinghouse
on Educational Management
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Published by the
American Association of School Administrators
1801 North Moore Street
Arlington, Virginia 22209

EA 007 271

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ERIC/CEM State-of-the-Knowledge Series, Number Thirty-three
Clearinghouse Accession Number: EA 007 271

The material in this publication was prepared pursuant to a contract with the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Prior to publication, the manuscript was submitted to the American Association of School Administrators for critical review and determination of professional competence. This publication has met such standards. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of either the American Association of School Administrators or the National Institute of Education.

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This work represents Volume VIII in AASA's Executive Handbook Series to be produced in 1975 and 1976. Additional titles in this series are: *Helping Administrators Negotiate* (Vol. I); *Declining Enrollment: What to Do* (Vol. II); *Improving School Staffs* (Vol. III); *Sex Equality in Educational Materials* (Vol. IV); *Sex Equality in School* (Vol. V); *Work Stoppage Strategies* (Vol. VI); *Sex Equality in Educational Administration* (Vol. VII). All 1976 members of the American Association of School Administrators will receive copies of the 1976 titles as part of their membership.

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Foreword

The American Association of School Administrators has consistently been a strong advocate for the public's right to know when it comes to news and information about the schools of this nation. Nothing is more fundamental to the improvement and furtherance of America's educational institutions than widespread understanding and knowledge about the program, personnel, activities and the students who attend the schools.

AASA believes that each school system in the nation must have a solid program of communications, both internally and externally, in order to inform and involve as many different publics as possible in the day in and day out operation of the schools. I know of no better way to achieve real progress than through an informed staff and citizenry. In fact, it just can't be done any other way with lasting effect.

AASA commends this book to administrators and board members as they go about the tremendous job of building quality education programs for the millions of youth in America. We believe that a vital ingredient in accomplishing this task is a communication's plan, well thought out and executed, which has as its primary goal the supplying of information on which citizens can base decisions.

This handbook was prepared by three well-known experts in the area of school communications — Don Bagin and Frank Grazian, both on the staff of Glassboro State College, Glassboro, N.J., and Charles Harrison, president of Communicaid, Inc., a public relations firm specializing in educational communications. Additional contributions have been made by William E. Henry, AASA Associate Director.

Paul B. Salmon
Executive Director
AASA

Introduction

A majority of people in the United States believe school boards are doing an inadequate job of informing them about board activities.

A 1975 survey conducted by the National School Boards Association showed that 51 percent of the people interviewed either did not know about board efforts to communicate or believed there is little or no effort made by the board to communicate board activities.

The people's concern over communication (or the lack of it) goes back further than that, of course. The Charles F. Kettering Foundation, commenting in *I/D/E/A Reporter* on the Annual Survey of the Public Schools conducted by Gallup International in 1969, drew these conclusions:

> While the American people seem reasonably well-informed about school activities, they are ill-informed about education itself.
>
> Since they have little or no basis for judging the quality of education in their local schools, pressures are obviously absent for improving the quality.
>
> Fortunately, the public would like more information about modern education, the new methods being tried, and the new ideas concerning the kind of education needed. In short, they need and ask for information that is presently not provided by the various media of communication.
>
> The public schools do a reasonably good job of interesting parents in school affairs. They do a very poor job in reaching those who do not have children attending the schools. A better way must be found to reach those persons in the community who do not happen to have children in the public schools, so that these persons may become informed, involved, and active. The future of the schools to a great extent depends on success in achieving this goal.

Evidently, school boards and school administrators didn't take the warning contained in the last paragraph above as seriously as they might have. Results of the fifth Annual Survey of the Public

Schools conducted in 1973 showed that, of the persons polled who had no children in the public schools, 38 percent were becoming less favorably disposed toward the public schools, while only 25 percent were becoming more favorably disposed.

A recent report from the U.S. Office of Education, entitled *The Condition of Education* (1976) showed a sharp drop in public confidence in people running educational institutions. In 1974, for example, 49 percent of those surveyed reported "a great deal of confidence" in educational administrators. This dropped to an astounding 30.9 percent in 1975. Said the USOE report: "While education outranked major companies and other governmental units, it fell below the scientific community and remained below medicine in its ability to sustain confidence."

As they face crisis upon controversy, the school board and administration are under increasing pressure to improve communication with the community. Money is hard to come by from any source, decreasing enrollment brings many problems as well as possible advantages, the public demands greater (and more reliable) accountability, teacher unions continue to apply the heat and rapid changes in educational goals and curriculum call for hurried understanding and even more rapid judgments.

An example of these pressures is provided by the */I/D/E/A/ Reporter* (1971): "Many educators insist that educational achievement is difficult to measure, that communities vary to such an extent that comparisons are meaningless, and that a testing program puts undue pressures on both teachers and students to get high scores. But here again, the burden of proof rests with those who oppose. The public wants some proof that their schools are good, and that they are getting their money's worth."

The book attempts to provide board members, administrators and others with the necessary information and guidance that should lead to better communication efforts. By bringing together the thinking of a number of experts in the field, AASA hopes that members of the school management team will find it easier to locate and use those materials that will be helpful in communications undertakings.

If we wish to maintain the public schools as a vital component of our society, we must do more to bring about a better understanding of how the public schools are supported and operated. Boards and school administrators must do a better job of reaching all audiences, and reaching them quickly and frequently with a wide variety of information.

This book presents a large number of ideas to help accomplish these goals. It is not intended to provide an in-depth explanation of

any one topic. It is designed, however, to direct readers to sources of information about key areas of the school public relations (PR) field.

When properly used, this volume should motivate school officials to apply new communications strategies to gain support for the public schools.

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CHAPTER I

Why Communicate?

It is important for the school board to devise a policy on communications — any policy for that matter — because it serves to define and guide actual practice. But there is another good reason for, and benefit from, writing a policy. The process of conceiving and writing the policy is in itself a procedure by which board members and other school officials learn; they can reexamine their individual and corporate philosophy, their individual and corporate commitments, the needs of the school system and the community, and their short- and long-range objectives.

At least, it should be all these things!

A policy can be developed in at least four ways:

1. The board can delegate one or more of its members to draft a policy.
2. The chief school administrator or some other staff member can be asked to draft a policy.
3. A committee composed of persons from within and without the school system can be appointed to conceive policy.
4. The board can adopt almost without change a policy already conceived and written by another board or some other organization or agency.

If the board agrees that one of the essential values of creating a policy is the creative process itself, then number four above is not the best way to go. The board may want to examine other boards' policies — and should do so.

But we're not talking about a casual review of other policies culminating in the adoption of one of them (or parts of several) without real debate and with only superficial changes. We're suggesting an examination of other policies only for the purpose of obtaining ideas, gathering information, and getting a line on general direction and structure.

The board may ask boards in nearby districts to send a copy of their policy on communications (if they have one). Or, better, the board can ask its state and national associations for sample policies. Later in this chapter we include exemplary board policies on communications for your examination. The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) also can be helpful, and we will discuss

that organization's views on communications policy shortly.

If the board and the administration are to benefit from the process of conceiving and writing policy, as we have suggested, what is the best way to proceed?

Policy-Drafting Committee

"Most school PR programs are masterminded by a PR committee," according to education writer Joseph A. Callanan (1968). This may be so, but there are committees and then there are committees. Mr. Callanan suggests a committee composed of "perhaps five or six staff members, selected mainly for their familiarity with the community and participation in its affairs." He further suggests that one or two of the members should have "some knowledge of news media and publication procedures."

Suggestions about the composition of the policy-drafting committee and its role also are offered by school PR specialists Leslie W. Kindred, Don Bagin and Donald R. Gallagher (1975):

> Under the leadership of the superintendent or a member of his immediate staff, invitations can be extended to a cross-section of individuals who have an interest in the proposed policy or who will be affected by it at a later time. They can be asked to serve on a committee for developing the policy, knowing that their recommendation will be subject to board of education acceptance, rejection or modification. The members of such a committee might consist of representatives of the board of education, administrators, teacher, parents and other community residents. It should be large enough in size to produce a rich reservoir of pertinent ideas and information and small enough to permit a suitable arrangement for getting the job done. Not only should the committee have well-balanced representation but it should be made up also of individuals who are seriously and constructively concerned with the promotion of public education. The work of the committee calls for the gathering of information, ideas and opinions about the needs and conditions to be met under the policy. It calls likewise for the determination of an appropriate rationale or statement or purpose as well as a decision to act that is in keeping with the rationale or purpose. The committee may decide to outline the general means for implementing the policy decision or to define the essential elements constituting the framework for a detailed program in school-community relations.

Mr. Callanan suggests that someone on the committee should be knowledgeable about dealing with the news media and putting to-

gether publications. But we suggest that there is a need for greater expertise than that. School communications — or public relations — is much broader than getting articles in the newspaper and putting out an occasional newsletter.

If one of the appointed committee members is knowledgeable about all facets of communication within the school system and between the school system and the community, that's a real plus. If none of the committee members has that kind of broad knowledge and/or experience, the board might want to bring in a consultant to initially advise the committee and to work with the members in any ways that seem productive. The board may be able to get free professional consulting help through its state school boards association. Or it may obtain the names of reliable consultants through the association or a local chapter of NSPRA.

The knowledgeable adviser can start the committee thinking immediately about a comprehensive policy — one that is not limited in its vision or direction to the news media and publications. For example, as the authors of a school public relations handbook state, a school district's communications program should be "a two-way system. Not only do school officials inform, but they are kept informed. Not only do they state opinions and express needs, but they listen to the opinions and desires of others." (Bagin, Grazian, and Harrison, 1972).

The handbook goes on to say what else a good school communications program is:

> A good communications system is for all people. The audience is not just teachers, not just parents, not just community leaders. The audience is everybody, including students. The good school communications system does not operate only before tax levies, only in quarterly newsletters, only when the news media will print articles about the system. District officials should be consciously operating their two-way communications system every day of the year, even though the same things don't necessarily happen every day. Until the public stops viewing the schools' communications system as one-way propaganda, there will be poor communication, and public education will continue to suffer the consequences.

As we have already stated, the creation of policy should be a learning process for those involved, including all board members, even though they might not be directly involved in the gathering of information and the writing of a draft policy. It is not exaggeration to say that many board members — perhaps even most — do not now view school communications, or public relations, as being essentially a

two-way process. Therefore, the committee that works up the draft policy on communications has not only the opportunity to add to the board's book of policies but also the chance to perhaps revise and expand board members' thinking about communication.

Mr. Callanan suggests that the PR committee get started this way:

> As a first assignment, your committee might investigate abrasive points of school-community interaction. This is preparation for the committee's big job; advising the board of education on community relations policies. Is there a communications lag between schools and residents? What are the major criticisms of the schools? Do these criticisms come from groups or individuals? Are curriculums geared to the needs of the community? How would a school bond election go right now? What kind of reputation do your schools have?

There are other questions the committee might seek answers to. Some of these are as follows:

- What is the current state of internal communications?
- How well do administrators communicate with faculty members and other employees, and vice-versa?
- What can, or should be done to improve this communication?
- How well do administrators and teachers communicate with students, and vice versa?
- What can, or should be done to improve this communication?
- What are the existing strengths of the school system's communications internally and with parents and the general public?
- What are the weaknesses?
- What are the various ways communication can take place?
- What are the various methods for two-way communications?
- Who will be responsible for what communications functions?

Exemplary Communications Policies

We have mentioned that the board must determine the objectives of the district's communications (PR) program as it considers policy and how it will be implemented later. Here are some examples of objectives as drafted by Jane P. Braunstein of the Cherry Hill, N.J., Public Schools (1973):

1. To promote public interest and participation in the operation of the school system.
2. To gather public attitudes and reactions about the school system and report them to the superintendent and the board.
3. To provide an honest, continuous, comprehensive flow of infor-

mation about the policies, procedures, programs, problems and progress of the school system to the community and the staff.

4. To develop the most effective means of communication with each of the school system's publics and to use all available media.
5. To develop programs in the district and in the individual schools that will integrate home, school and community in meeting the needs of the children in the schools.
6. To develop and maintain the confidence of the community in the school board and the school staff.
7. To develop a climate that attracts good teachers and encourages the staff to strive for excellence in the educational program.
8. To anticipate and forestall problems that are brought about by lack of understanding.
9. To evaluate past procedures in order to make improvements in future communications procedures.

Board policies on school communication come in a variety of lengths and styles. We thought it would be helpful to provide a sampling of different kinds of policies for guidance and referral.

Policy Sample #1 (Alhambra City and High School Districts, Calif.)

Within the bounds of legal and ethical responsibilities to children, the Board of Education of the Alhambra City and High School Districts has a right and responsibility to inform the public of significant happenings within its schools. It is the position of the Board that the schools belong to the public, and the public is entitled to be well informed about the operations of the school system.

It is further the position of the Board that the school districts operate most successfully with the support of the community and that such support is dependent upon the maintenance of positive public opinion. Opinions are formed on the basis of available information or the lack of it, and it is considered to be important that school activities, methods, and objectives be conveyed to those to whom the board is responsible.

It will be the policy of the Board to maintain a continuing program of internal employee relations and community relations through two-way communications.

The Superintendent shall encourage the creation and implementation of good public relations for enabling the community to make

known its desires, and for the Board to make known its plans and actions.

The Superintendent will periodically evaluate the community relations program and advise the Board of recommended modifications and improvements.

It is the responsibility of every employee, certificated and classified, to promote good community relations for the schools and for the educational betterment of the students.

Policy Sample #2 (Franklin Area School District, Pa.)

The board of school directors believes that the cause of public education can be promoted, resulting in increased instructional benefits for the pupils, by establishing a policy on educational communications. This belief includes the following principles:

1. Educational communication should be a planned, systematic, two-way process of communication between the educational organization and its internal and external publics.
2. Educational communication should be many faceted and should include a variety of media to efficiently and effectively inform all citizens of the district.
3. Educational communication to be effective must include a planned program with involvement and feedback.
4. Educational communication must be internal as well as external and stress the dissemination of factual, objective and realistic data about the school district.
5. Educational communication must be dynamic and sensitive to change as determined by events and evaluation of the program.

Policy Sample #3 (Mobile, Ala.)

PUBLIC RELATIONS: To provide a two-way flow of information and interaction between the board and all groups interested in and affected by the program of public relations. The carrying out of this function makes the board of school commissioners more effective in helping citizens to understand the power and influence of education and to achieve the kind of information desired for their children. This function broken down includes:

1. Serving the total community as a sounding board, receiving suggestions and criticisms relative to the improvement of public schools.
2. Interpreting to the public the policies of the board and the accomplishments, purposes, problems and needs of the schools.

3. Helping citizens through conferences, conversations, public appearances, and the use of mass media to understand the power and influence of education and the kind of education needed in our modern society.
4. Working with community leaders, civic groups, committees of citizens, PTA leaders, and leaders in government in order that the aspirations and hopes of citizens for education and the needs of the schools will be understood and that programs of action can be sponsored with public understanding and support.

Policy Sample #4 (Austin, Minn.)

Public relations is a by-product of all school activity. Successful implementation of public relations objectives rests with all school personnel -- teaching, administrative, secretarial and custodial. Assistance and professional advice are available to anyone wishing to initiate a direct public relations or publicity project.

Publicity is only a small part of the total program. Responsibility for publicity rests with the individual group, organization, or department concerned. Primary responsibility for public relations rests with administrators and public relations representatives assigned in each department or building.

Complete information on all phases of the instructional program is the privilege of tax-paying citizens and constitutes the core of a successful public relations program. Severe problems arise when there is dissemination of inadequate, incomplete, misleading, or biased data. Such problems can work to the disadvantage of the entire school system and individuals in the system.

The National School Public Relations Association, which includes as members the vast majority of those persons in the country administering school communications programs, urges that board policy on school communications clearly delegate authority for implementing the policy. NSPRA's complete statement on communications policy is part of its standards for educational public relations programs; it is printed here in full.

1. The educational organization shall commit to writing a clear and concise policy statement with respect to its public relations program.
2. The policy statement shall be approved through formal action by the governing body of the organization, shall be published in its policy manual, and shall be subjected to review by the governing body annually.

3. The policy statement shall express the purposes of the organization's public relations program and shall provide for the delegation of such authority to the executives of the organization as deemed necessary to facilitate the achievement of such purposes.
4. The provisions of the policy statement shall be made known to the entire staff or membership of the organization through all appropriate means. As a minimum, the provisions shall be published in the personnel handbook or other publications of the organization.
5. Commitment to the achievement of the purposes of the organization's public relations policy shall be demonstrated through the allocation of adequate human and financial resources to the public relations program.

Distribution and Review of Policy

Once a school communications policy has been drafted, reviewed, debated, and adopted, it should not be placed in a three-ring binder and forgotten. Copies of the policy should be made available to as many persons as possible, but especially to the following individuals and groups: all school district employees, all advisory committees to the board and the administration, all parent-teacher organizations, all other organizations or committees in the district that have a special (even if temporary) relationship with the schools, and the governing body or bodies representing the people of the district.

Furthermore, the policy should not be considered to be etched in stone. NSPRA, for example, recommends that it be reviewed annually. The review might be conducted by the same committee that orginally drafted the policy, or by a similar group. Of course, if personnel are eventually hired to administer the public relations program, such persons ought to be part of the review process. Occasionally, it is helpful to have both the policy and its implementation evaluated by an outside consultant. Such an objective assessment is helpful on a regular basis (every five years or so), but also at such times as the board makes major administrative changes (for example, hires a new superintendent or a new director of public relations).

The outside evaluation at such times as mentioned above provides the incoming administration with a good and reliable indicator of the existing strengths and weaknesses of both policy and program, plus expert recommendations as to desirable changes in the policy and program.

CHAPTER II

Who Does What?

If board of education members have seriously considered and debated the policy on school communications (public relations), then members will have carried out one of their prime responsibilities. Establishing a philosophy and direction for public relations is as important as implementation of any aspect of the policy, because it decides what that implementation shall be.

If the board's policy, for example, has focused on two-way communication, then what follows from that policy may be radically different (and hopefully better) than what follows in a district where board members have adopted a PR policy that speaks only of getting out news releases and an occasional newsletter.

But the board's responsibilities and duties concerning communication don't end with the adoption of policy. Some only begin with the adoption of the policy, as do the duties and responsibilities of other school employees from the superintendent to the switchboard operator.

The board and individual board members have very important roles to play in the implementation of the communications policy. These are described below, and some of them are further elaborated in subsequent chapters.

Board's Duties and Responsibilities

1. To see to it that the communications policy is being implemented as intended. The board acting as a whole or through a committee may keep track of the implementation of the policy through the superintendent and/or another administrator charged with responsibility for implementation. The superintendent or other administrator should provide on a regular basis either a written or verbal report (or both) describing how the policy has been implemented during the period covered by the report and pointing out any particular strengths or weaknesses of the program. The board, or its committee, should expect that the reporting official will explain what is being done to correct weaknesses and deal with problems.

2. To communicate directly with the public through the board's open meetings. This is two-way communication, with the board conveying information through its regular business and special reports

and presentations and obtaining feedback through that portion of the meeting when members of the audience may communicate their opinions, questions, and ideas.

3. To communicate directly with the public through appearances before school and civic organizations such as the PTA, League of Women Voters, etc. Again, board members appearing before such groups should be conscious of gathering information as well as dispensing it.

4. To communicate directly with school employees, students, and district residents who are members of advisory committees serving the board.

5. To communicate directly with other governmental bodies and their members, such as boards of education in neighboring districts, municipal officials, and state legislators.

Notice that most of the board's or individual board members' PR duties and responsibilities have to do with face-to-face communication — and often in public view. Even when board members are engaging in two-way communication in private — as with an advisory committee or possibly with members of the council — they should expect that their communication will eventually have some impact on overt relations between the public and the board.

The board member making a speech before the PTA is engaging in public relations as surely as the administrator writing the monthly newsletter. Since this is so, the board member must be guided by the same philosophical and other guidelines that govern the direction of the overall public relations effort. For example, if the board expects the administration to be candid in public newsletters about school problems as well as successes, the board member speaking with the mayor cannot pretend that the same problems do not exist. And if the board's policy encourages the administrative staff to obtain feedback from students, employees, parents, and other district residents through a variety of means, then the board member cannot avoid opportunities for listening to the audiences he or she comes in contact with.

The individual board member, of course, must be cognizant of local and state regulations that spell out duties of board members and also indicate what board members may not do. For example, in most instances, board members cannot take action on their own. Only the board has authority to make a decision or render a judgment. The board member's knowledge of such rules and regulations not only helps dictate the communications roles he or she should play, but also may prevent him or her from engaging in some activity that can only serve to damage the public relations program of the district.

Board members must be careful to avoid usurping the PR duties and responsibilities assigned by the board or chief administrator to others. We recall an occasion when a board delegated responsibility for production of a special publication about a bond issue program to an assistant to the superintendent in charge of PR. The assistant had engaged an outside consultant to design, write, and print the publication. A board member, acting without authority and without consultation, went over the head of both the assistant to the superintendent and the outside consultant to contact the printer of the publication and urge a speedup in the production schedule.

The particulars of the example may not be common, but the problem of board members sometimes taking over other duties and responsibilities is more common than it should be. If those persons charged with specific duties and responsibilities for public relations are not performing in the manner expected, they should be asked to improve and change or be relieved of those duties and responsibilities. It is never the best alternative for the board as a whole or individual members to take over the duties and responsibilities assigned to administrators or other employees.

In many cases where board members take on public relations duties and responsibilities that are not intended by the policy on communications, the reason for the usurpation may be due to confusion or vagueness in the policy itself or in resolutions and regulations based on the policy. If the duties and responsibilities are not clearly and properly assigned, the board is inviting trouble. Not only is there the danger that board members will take on roles not suited to them, but there is the greater danger that no one will perform desired functions.

Delegating Duties and Responsibilities

Aside from the kinds of functions for board members already discussed, most other PR duties and responsibilities must be shouldered by others. Board policy or subsequent directives should designate in very specific language just who has what authority and who is to perform what functions. The superintendent, or chief school officer, normally has overall responsibility for implementation of the policy on communications (public relations) and is the one person usually considered answerable to the board.

In most instances, however, the superintendent, or chief school officer, should not be assigned most or all of the many duties and responsibilities called for by policy or subsequent directives. The superintendent, of course, plays a communications role very similar to that of a board member, insofar as he/she makes face-to-face

appearances with school and community groups. But it is not advisable to make the superintendent also responsible for such activities as news releases, newsletters, and special publications.

Indeed, it is strongly recommended that the prime responsibility for carrying out the PR program be delegated to someone other than the superintendent. This person may perform most of the duties himself or herself and may also further delegate duties and responsibilities. Most persons knowledgeable in school PR recommend that wherever possible a full-time PR specialist should be hired by the board and given authority (under the superintendent) for carrying out the communications program. Education writer Joseph A. Callanan (1968) suggests the following job description for the person hired as director of communications or public relations:

PUBLIC RELATIONS DIRECTORS

Staff Position

Directly responsible to the Superintendent of Schools.

Assignment

Plans and directs an internal and external information and communications program for the district. Is a member of the Superintendent's Council, and serves as an advisory on public relations matters to the Board of Education, special project staffs, and citizens advisory committees.

Duties and Responsibilities

1. Press, radio, and TV contacts
2. Writing press releases
3. Staff newsletter and publications
4. Community newsletter and publications
5. Election and bond referenda campaigns
6. Superintendent's annual report
7. Working with community, civic, and service groups
8. Special projects (American Education Week, B.I.E. Day, etc.)

Other Responsibilities

1. Publicity on federal projects
2. Editorial services for central-office staff
3. Writing speeches, reports, or papers for central-office staff and Board of Education
4. Speakers bureau
5. In-service PR training for school staffs
6. Assessment of public attitudes
7. Development of teacher recruitment materials
8. Photographic services

Qualifications

Education: Earned master's degree in English, journalism, or school administration

Experience: Experience as teacher and/or administrator, and experience in public relations and/or journalism

While it is desirable in most cases to have a full-time administrator in charge of the public relations program, it is often not possible or practical in small districts. Educational PR specialists Don Bagin, Frank Grazian, and Charles Harrison (1972) suggest the board consider these alternatives to a full-time PR director:

- A teacher with a background in communications or public relations. By giving the teacher a decreased teaching load, you can free him or her to assume communications responsibilities. Usually, this leads to little more than news releases and newsletters because the person's prime responsibility remains in the classroom. But it is a start.
- An administrator with a communications or public relations background. District communications could be part of his/her responsibility, but don't just add it to a list of already determined duties or the job will be worked on only when everything else is done. Communications responsibilities can be combined with one of the following: personnel, adult school, grant-writing, or negotiations.
- Someone in the community. Some communities have many people talented in communications and public relations. They can be helpful, especially with news releases and publications. Consider retired persons as candidates.
- A graduate student who must serve an internship. Both on the master's degree and doctoral levels, students often are required to work in a school district for graduate credit. Some may be used in communications, providing inexpensive help.
- School public relations practitioners who can work part-time in the district. They can help establish a program. They'll do more than just prepare news releases and newsletters; they'll bring plenty of ideas for face-to-face communication and help the rest of your staff understand communications and how they can undertake their responsibilities. The problem with this kind of help is that it is often unavailable when needed.
- A reporter who can be retained on a part-time basis. Usually this person will be able to get school news in various papers. He or she should also bring objectivity to the district's thinking —

something often needed. However, some newspapers disapprove of reporters doing this.

- A consulting firm. Because few firms exist with specialists in school communications, most offer general PR help. They are usually expert in layout, ensuring attractive publications. Also, they bring a strong background in working with the mass media. They can bring the outside view to school officials looking at problems from the inside. Often the educators have to do most of the legwork for the PR consultants and spend considerable time checking facts before allowing materials to be released to the public.

As we mentioned before, the board policy or directive that designates PR duties and responsibilities should be very specific. Here are examples of the duties and responsibilities some districts have assigned to those persons in charge of implementing the overall PR program.

Example #1 (North Penn School District, Lansdale, Pa.)

Inform the several "publics" of the school district of the overall school program and interpret board and administrative action in a meaningful way.

Major responsibilities are to:

1. Disseminate information to the public in a systematic fashion.
2. Disseminate information to the staff of the school district.
3. Process requests for use of school facilities by community groups.
4. Edit curriculum publications.

Key duties are to:

1. Disseminate information to the public in a systematic fashion:
   a. Prepare news releases for radio and the press and newsletters on school activities, events and programs.
   b. Collect information from building sources, district administrators and Board of Education in a systematic fashion.
   c. Coordinate the schedules of school personnel with requests for speakers from community organizations.
   d. Prepare brochures describing the school district and available positions for use in personnel recruitment.
   e. Prepare brochures describing the school program for distribution through the Chamber of Commerce, realtors and local industries.
   f. Prepare interpretative sound/film presentations for service club, PTA and other community organizations.

2. Disseminate information to the staff of the school district:

a. Keep the school staff informed on planning of facilities and programs, activities of staff members, board actions which may affect the staff, and ideas which are worthy of general consideration.

b. Announce position vacancies.

c. Present brief biographies of new employees.

3. Process requests for use of school facilities by community groups:

a. Provide appropriate school facilities for community use within the limitations of the board policy.

b. Keep building personnel informed of scheduled use of their facilities.

4. Edit curriculum publications:

a. Aid curriculum writers to maintain a consistent style in curriculum publications.

b. Assist committees with the reproduction arrangements for curriculum publications.

Example #2 (Dallas, Tex.)

Duties and Responsibilities

1. Develop and maintain news media relations, including:

a. Handling inquiries and serving as official district spokesman when the General Superintendent is not available.

b. Developing and distributing news releases.

c. Assisting reporters during board meetings and other official functions.

d. Arranging and conducting timely news conferences.

2. Meet daily with the General Superintendent to discuss district problems, progress and plans; review news coverage; and plan news release activities.

3. Furnish information pertaining to the district to outside individuals and organizations in the form of publications and surveys.

4. Provide school management with continual feedback from various audiences, and participate in management decision making.

5. Provide a continuous program of communication to the district's many publics through regular newsletters and broadcast programming.

6. Maintain an on-going evaluation of communication activities.

Example #3 (Des Moines, Iowa)

Types of Activities Performed Frequently:

Collecting and analyzing data and preparing reports and news releases; meeting with representatives of news media; advising others

who periodically prepare materials for general distribution; attending meetings of school personnel to be knowledgeable about subjects which may be of general interest to the public.

Basic Functions:

Assists the superintendent in preparing materials for speeches, reports, and bulletins.

Prepares news releases, communicates with news media personnel on a regular basis, and keeps them informed about school activities and events which are of general public interest and are beneficial to the district.

Serves as liaison between all school district personnel and the news media.

Advises committees and individuals about news materials which should be considered for publication.

Supervises the printing of communications from central office personnel of a public relations nature.

Prepares internal publications upon request of the superintendent.

Attends meetings of the board of education and committees upon request of the superintendent, and assists news media personnel.

Advises, upon request, central office personnel, principals, and individual teachers about projects and displays.

Performs other functions pertaining to public information programs, upon assignment by the superintendent.

It is apparent from the examples listed that there are a great many duties and responsibilities that must be delegated to one or more persons charged with overall implementation and supervision of the PR program. Each policy urges the board and chief school administrator to assure that the assigned duties and responsibilities adequately implement the board's policy calling for two-way communication. The Dallas board, for example, tells its PR coordinator to "provide school management with continual feedback from various audiences," and the other two statements refer to the collection of data and information.

The board might want to be even more specific in this area by making the PR coordinator responsible for such activities as periodic opinion-polling to be conducted among employees, parents, and other district residents. And there may be other projects that the board or administration develops as a means of implementing two-way communication. For example, in chapter 6 we talk about key communicators and advisory committees, both instruments for obtaining feedback as well as dispensing information.

The examples cited generally assign duties and responsibilities to the person in charge of carrying out the total PR program. But the board also should be aware of the need to acquaint other school employees with their particular PR roles. Here are some guidelines for other school personnel:

I. School Principals

A. Develop a system and schedule for communicating face-to-face on a regular basis with parents, teachers, other staff members, and students.

B. Develop a newsletter or newssheet to be issued periodically to parents and faculty members.

C. Organize advisory committees that include parents, other community residents, staff members and students. These may be standing committees or those organized for specific purposes.

D. Designate one or more parents and teachers to gather news in the school for dissemination through the school newsletter and reporting to the district PR director for possible use in the district newsletter and/or district news releases. (If each school is responsible for generating news in the local news media, this responsibility also should be spelled out.)

E. Keep the PR director and/or superintendent fully informed of any events, attitudes, and opinions generated by persons connected with the school that might in any way affect internal or external relations or call for decisions and actions necessary to counteract or head off adverse publicity, disruptive activities, and potential conflicts.

If the district operates according to a management team concept, the PR duties and responsibilities of school principals may be incorporated into an overall description of the team's organization and the interrelationships between members of the team.

II. Teachers and Counselors

A. Remember that students appreciate and learn from praise. Praise students verbally when they do good work and demonstrate good behavior, and write a student a short note occasionally that tells him or her how pleased you are with something he or she did or said.

B. Send notes home occasionally to parents, advising them of something good their child did or said. Almost everyone does something worthwhile sometime.

C. Report the news of what's happening in your classroom or the activities you are engaged in. Maybe you have time for only a short note or a phone call, but let the proper person (school reporter, PR coordinator, etc.) know that there may be good news in what you and your students are doing.

D. Devise some means for communicating face-to-face with parents other than back-to-school night (particularly elementary school teachers).

III. Receptionists and Secretaries

A. When people come into the office, don't make them wait for acknowledgement. Greet them cordially and ask what help you can provide.

B. Develop good manners on the phone. Greet every caller as if you are there to serve each one especially. Because you are.

C. Have as much information available as possible. For example, a secretary should know the boss's schedule and whereabouts. Record names, phone numbers, dates, and answers to frequently asked questions so that you can refer to them quickly.

IV. Bus Drivers and Custodians

A. Be courteous to children, parents, and others whom you encounter.

B. Try to learn the names of children or adults encountered most often, and address them by name.

C. If you are frequently called on to answer questions about the school system or a particular school, obtain the information needed to supply complete answers.

These are not meant to be complete lists in any category. They are intended to show that everyone connected with the schools has some duties and responsibilities when it comes to good communications. And board policies and administrative directives should not overlook these professional and nonprofessional employees.

One PR policy or overall directive should be able to include everyone and spell out all duties and responsibilities. One of the duties of the PR director should be to arrange for whatever inservice training is necessary to prepare other personnel for their roles. Of course, any written guidance in addition to a copy of the policy and directive on duties and responsibilities also will help assure that everyone will know his or her role — and carry it out.

CHAPTER III

Communication at the Board Meeting

The importance of the school board meeting as a communications vehicle should not be underestimated. It presents an excellent opportunity to improve relations with the community and with the various publics — both external and internal — served by the board. Properly conducted, the board meeting offers board members a powerful and effective public relations device that can go a long way toward opening up true communications. Poorly conducted, the meeting can erode public support and undermine the overall public relations efforts of the district.

Cutlip and Center (1971), in underscoring the importance of meetings in general, point out that they provide both an opportunity to communicate to a selected audience and an opportunity to listen to that audience. The carefully staged meeting, they note, will result in that all-important goal of professional communicators — two-way communication. They warn, however, that meetings, "to be effective, require purpose, careful planning and staging and skillful direction."

In discussing the "two-way street" concept of communications, Cutlip and Center emphasize that listening is a difficult task that requires both humility and systematic effort. "Too often what purports to be communication," they write, "is simply opposing ideas passing each other in psychological space." For two-way communication to be effective, they offer this advice:

> Both lines of traffic must be given equal right-of-way. Unless you know the values, viewpoints, and language of your audience you are not likely to get through. These values and viewpoints can be learned only through systematic and sympathetic listening.

Planning the Agenda

The need for proper planning in staging a meeting is discussed by several authors. Johnson and Hartman (1964) suggest that "boards must plan wisely and completely if plans are to be presented to the public clearly and logically." They maintain that the public will

support board actions if "the people are shown all the needs and have all the facts all the time." And Dapper and Carter (1966) contend that superintendents should prepare the meeting agenda far enough in advance to give both board members and the news media "a chance to study the background information ordinarily furnished with the agenda items." Many boards, they note, release advance stories on agenda items to the press so that residents with specific interests can make a point of attending the meeting.

Goble, in his 1972 article on board meetings, warns that all "the public relations, coffee, cookies, and punch in the world won't help a school board or an administration that hasn't done its homework." He goes on:

> There should be no surprises between board members and administration (at the meeting). Nothing can break down the business-like image of the board, crack its credibility, and sever its working relationship internally, as open criticism and confrontation at public meetings. Board members should not 'play' to the audience. Administrators should not allow the board to be caught in embarrassing situations. Through proper planning with the board president and the administrative team, the superintendent can prepare for the unexpected and, at the same time, set the stage for the board to conduct its affairs in an orderly fashion. Consequently, it is imperative that the administration maintain frank, open and continuing communications with the board. On the other hand, the board has a responsibilities (through proper procedures) to inform the administration of citizen inquiries, complaints and concerns.

In planning an agenda, some districts take into account the news value of the various items. *Education U.S.A.*, reporting the results of a nationwide survey, found that a number of districts strove to include newsworthy items for their public relations value. The publication quotes a Midwest superintendent who said that "one or two items may be placed on the agenda to create a positive image, especially if a controversial topic or subject must by necessity take place." He added, "The schools do have an excellent educational program and it is not difficult to balance an agenda . . ."

Another superintendent, commenting on an overloaded, haphazard agenda, is quoted in the same article as saying that "some arranging of agendas to schedule the number of strong interest items is necessary to avoid an agenda so packed that each item cannot be given adequate attention."

Some districts even schedule reports on educational topics for their news value. An administrator, department head, or curriculum

coordinator may be invited to address the board publicly with a progress report on some program or project. Copies of the report should be made available to the media representatives during the meeting.

Involving the Public

The attitude of the board toward the audience is a key factor in reaping communications dividends from the board meeting. Goble contends that school board meetings "should first be thought of with people in mind." He adds:

> How are people greeted at your school board meeting? Do they wander in and fumble for a place to sit? Or does someone genuinely and officially welcome them to "their school board meeting?" Believe it or not, many school patrons still come to school board meetings with a sense of fear, distrust and thorough misunderstanding of the operational procedures of the board. It just stands to reason that if patrons of the school district are greeted with a smile and offered courteous attention (even if the person has an "axe to grind"), the board and administration stand a better chance of gaining some mutual understanding of the problem, the work, and the concerns of both groups."

Movshovitz (1975) suggests that the board president say a few words of greeting to get the meeting off to a good start. She also recommends distributing copies of the agenda to all those present and handing out a welcome booklet "explaining the parliamentary procedures to be followed, giving the names of school officials and perhaps discussing how educators and the community can work together for the betterment of the schools."

To keep down the cost of distributing complete agendas to every member of the audience, Joseph L. Davis, assistant superintendent of the Columbus, Ohio, School District, suggested to his board that it provide an abbreviated agenda with each item summarized in two or three sentences. He adds that the same objective could be realized using an overhead projector. "As each item is taken up," he said, "a transparency could be projected on the screen, summarizing the proposed action in a few words."

The welcome brochure is a device that is being used with increasing frequency by boards throughout the nation. One published by District 8, Roosevelt, New York, contains these items: an introductory statement about the purpose of the brochure, a brief statement about board members, names of board members, a listing of board meeting dates and times, an explanation of how the board acts, a

comment about the superintendent of schools' role in meetings, an explanation of the agenda, district statistics, an administrative directory, and a word of thanks for showing interest in the local school district.

The Roosevelt brochure also contains a brief comment about the visitor's right to address the board at the meeting. It informs the visitor that, during the first portion of the meeting, he or she "is permitted to make a brief statement, express his or her viewpoint, or ask a question regarding matters related to the school system."

Gallagher, in his article on smoother school board meetings, argues that the public should be allowed to address the board at public meetings:

> Those boards who acknowledge the presence of local citizens at a public meeting by affording them an opportunity to address the board will build much trust and public faith with the community. On the other hand, boards who conduct public meetings in a vacuum, by not explaining certain actions to citizens in attendance, serve to build a climate of mistrust with the very folks who can help the schools.

The Pennsylvania School Boards Association also urges its members to set aside "some modest portion of the meeting time for visitors' comments or questions." However, it warns members that "involvement doesn't mean giving the meeting over to visitors. Don't debate with visitors."

And Dickinson (1969), in summing up the results of a seminar held in Chicago on the topic of "New Dimensions of Board Leadership," proposes this idea to boards facing controversial issues from the public:

> Find places other than the board room to fight and to thrash out issues. It *is* hard to stand before the lights at an open board meeting and make an on-the-spot decision five minutes after the public petition. Instead, why not sponsor public forums and town meetings as means to get a sounding on issues?

Anderson (1974) warns board members that if the public is not allowed to express its views, "it will seek other avenues of expression." He views dissent and objections as an opportunity to help the public find out what is going on. And he cautions members not to accept objections as personal attacks, because "you [will] antagonize your public, [and] you will be missing a wonderful opportunity to have them share in the decision-making process."

Another area that can cause a communications problem with both the public and the press is the executive or closed session. Most

authorities warn against interrupting a public meeting to go into a closed one. Mullins (1973) urges that such sessions be held infrequently and be scheduled at the end of the agenda when necessary. "It's not only irritating to the press to have to sit idle while the board huddles in secret," she writes, "but it's downright discourtesy to any citizens who may be waiting to get to a discussion of a specific issue."

Movshovitz (1975) argues that executive sessions "tend to destroy the board's credibility and to provoke suspicion and mistrust." She suggests avoiding them if at all possible and reserving them "for discussion of problems involving personnel, discipline, salary negotiations, land acquisition, legal matters, etc."

If closed sessions are to be held, Mullins (1973) recommends that the press be invited to attend. It's a tactic, she contends, that can pay dividends in several ways:

> First, it helps newsmen to obtain the background information they may need to present any eventually resulting story to the public. Second, it proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that your board is not discussing privately what it ought to be discussing publicly. As an added fringe benefit, it tells the press people better than any words that you want to cooperate with them and that you respect their integrity.

She also believes that most reporters will keep the session off the record if requested to do so in advance. "Just make it clear at the outset," she writes, "that any one who doesn't will be summarily banished from all future closed meetings and his competitors permitted to stay."

A valuable checklist for improving board meetings is provided by Kinder (1972). Among other things, he suggests that these basic questions be kept in mind:

_____Is the room warm and friendly?

_____Is the furniture comfortable?

_____Is the board table so designed that board members can see each other and yet be seen by those who attend school board meetings?

_____Does the room provide for comfort of visitors?

_____Is the room well ventilated?

_____Is a podium provided for those who wish to address the board?

_____Are provisions made for an amplifier?

_____Are arrangements made to accommodate members of the press, television, and radio?

_____Does each school board member have a name plate in front of him or her?

_____Do meetings begin on time?

_____Are provisions made for citizens to speak at an appropriate time during the meeting?

_____Are they listened to attentively and with respect?

_____Is there a policy relative to citizens addressing the board covering the following: (a) their place on the agenda, (b) the time allotted for such presentations, (c) the information that each is to give to the board, such as name, address, and topic of statement?

_____If a reporter attends the meetings, is time set aside prior to the meeting so that he receives a briefing of what is to come up at the meeting?

_____If a reporter does not attend the meetings, are provisions made for sending information on each school board meeting to the local media?

_____Does the superintendent of schools work closely with the reporter, the editor and publisher in keeping them up-to-date on what is going on in the local school system?

_____If there an indication of mutual respect between board members and between the board and superintendent?

_____Does each board member show that he or she has done the homework relative to agenda items that are to be brought up?

_____Does the board devote its time to major issues and policy discussion and avoid details and administrative involvement?

_____Except for questions and answers at designated times, do board members refrain from engaging in conversation and discussion with members of the audience?

_____Is a written summary of the actions taken at the board meeting distributed to all school personnel as soon as possible (no later than 12 hours after the meeting)?

CHAPTER IV

Communication Through the News Media

Working effectively with the news media has always been a difficult task for school board members and administrators. Many writers cite the adversary relationship that exists between the schools and the news media and point out how their interests often conflict.

Cutlip and Center (1971) recognize the fact that "organizations want news reported in a manner that will promote their objectives and will not cause them trouble," while "the press wants news that will interest readers and viewers."

Administrators, they say, complain:

Why does the press always sensationalize things?
The papers never get things right.
They take things out of context.
You can't trust reporters.
I didn't say that at all.
Why do reporters enjoy stirring up trouble?

Newspersons, they write, countercomplain:

That organization will never come clean.
They won't give us the real news, only a lot of puffs.
They won't let you in to see the men with the real news.
What are they trying to hide?

Hohenberg (1973) blames both parties for the situation and calls for "well trained journalists to do the job — men and women who understand the problems of the schools and know how to write about them."

> The old journalistic weakness for emphasizing trouble rather than achievement is only part of the difficulty in achieving a balanced presentation of the news of education. In many cities, the extreme sensitivity of school administrators to criticism handicaps even their defenders when they embark on a purely fact-finding mission. Such sensitivity often is exceeded only by that of the press itself when it is under heavy community criticism. In such situations, there is little possibility for a constructive dialogue and school and press drift into postures of mutual

hostility. This is particularly true in some of the struggles over school integration and busing in northern cities.

Hohenberg, however, sees an encouraging trend in cities such as Pontiac, Mich.; Richmond, Va.; Charlotte, N.C. and San Francisco, Calif., where community crises have been covered with "cool, careful, impartial reporting." In Pontiac, he notes, balanced reporting of the events concerning the 1971-72 historic court order helped bring about "a measure of calm, if not serenity."

A Mutual Responsibility

Grazian (1970), on the other hand, is not as optimistic about improved reporting of education news by the media. He argues that the schools and the press share mutual responsibility for communicating information about education to the public but urges educators and board members to take the lead by understanding how the news media function in a democratic society. "If educators and board members refuse to face reality and improve press relations," he writes, "educational improvement will suffer."

He suggests that school officials immediately improve two areas where criticism is greatest — "inaccessibility to newsmen and failure to describe things in simple terms." He writes:

> Reporters often complain that educators and board members go out of their way to get favorable publicity but make themselves scarce when unfavorable news has developed. They argue that officials must realize that newspapers must report both the good and the bad in the public interest.
>
> And newsmen tend to chafe at the educational jargon that must be translated into simple English for their reading public. Why, they ask, must educators use terms like "pupil stations," "empirically validated," and "multi-media" when such balderdash merely confounds an already "overtaxed" public?

Other writers call for a partnership between the schools and the news media. Movshovitz (1975), in particular, argues that the media and the schools make up a team with at least two common interests — "the satisfaction of the public's right to know and the educational welfare of the children in the community." However, she states that "board members have the responsibility of insuring that these common interests are recognized and that the press and the schools work together as friends."

If board members keep in mind what she terms the three "C's" of media communication — continuity, candor, and consideration — the relationship, according to her, should be mutually rewarding. She explains how each of these key words should be applied:

You can't have a relationship with the media by deluging them with press releases at budget or referendum time and ignoring them the rest of the year. To establish a relationship, you must supply the media with a steady and interesting diet of education news.

As to candor, earn a reputation for "leveling" with the media. Establish your credibility by being honest, open, fair, and accurate. Don't avoid controversial topics. Instead, explain your position in regard to them.

Consideration means understanding how the media operate and the works of the editors and reporters, learning the procedures for submitting news, responding quickly to requests for information, exhibiting thoughtfulness and courtesy in dealing with newsmen. In other words, it means treating the media and their representatives the way you would like them to treat you.

A dialogue with news media personnel held by the Western New York Chapter of the National School Public Relations Association reached five major conclusions in the area of school-press relations. These were summarized in a 1971 special report:

1. Schoolmen should be honest and candid with newsmen.

2. Continuous information (releases, newsletters, etc.) should be sent to all media representatives. Radio and TV people indicated they would use them.

3. School public relations people should have access to board of education privileged information.

4. Newsmen and schoolmen need to better understand one another's respective roles.

5. Controversy is news, and media people are more willing to help the schools better interpret crucial issues — if schoolmen initiate information.

A number of authors suggest that the key to good news media relations is to be found in the attitude of board members and other school officials. Mullins (1973), a former board member and newspaper woman, forcibly makes this point when she urges board members to accept the fact that "the press is not present in your board room by virtue of your generosity and tolerance." She argues that newsmen should not be considered intruders in the board's private domain, but should be looked on as the eyes, ears, and voice of the same community that the board is attempting to serve. She suggests that board members can do an enormous amount to foster better news media relations "by treating the press as a necessary and wel-

come part of your educational team, which is exactly what it ought to be."

Bagin, Grazian, and Harrison (1972) offer similar advice and add:

> Treat newsmen as you would like them to treat you. Respect the fact that they are trained professionals in their field just as you are in yours. Accept their right to probe into a district's activities to keep the public informed. And communicate those feelings to them. You'll be surprised at the unexpected dividends it will pay.

They also urge school officials to get to know reporters on an informal, first-name basis. Reporters who are on friendly terms with sources, they write, "will make every effort to be fair" to those sources when controversy develops. However, they warn school people to expect to be on the receiving end of criticism in the news media from time to time. "When it happens," they report, "don't throw away all your good efforts by instinctively rebuking newsmen."

Appointing a Press Liaison

The question of who should speak for the school district is not answered adequately in the literature. It is common knowledge that reporters will seek out information from whatever source is willing to offer it. This problem is compounded when factions develop on a board or when individual board members want to speak out on issues or desire to see their names in print for political or other reasons. It is difficult — possibly even unconstitutional — for a board to prevent an individual member from speaking out publicly when he or she wishes to do so.

Most authors, however, agree that one person should serve as spokesman or liaison officer to the media. This is deemed particularly important when controversial issues develop or during teacher-board negotiating sessions. The American Association of School Administrators recommends that "It is also wise to have one person responsible for drafting all written statements to the media."

Lewis (1964) suggests that the school superintendent has the responsibility of interpreting the school's program to the public. But she recommends that, except in very small districts, a public relations director or press-relations officer be appointed to do a job that requires "a certain background, experience, and interest." She writes

> Through his office should flow all news from the school system, other than what is created directly by the superintendent.

> A superintendent who is news conscious will use the public relations director as an advisor and planner for his public relations policies. In addition to having a public relations officer, some school systems utilize the advice of a public relations committee, usually made up of other administrators and teachers.

Most authorities agree that it is imperative to hire an experienced or trained person to handle the district's news relations program. Part of this person's job, according to Movshovitz (1975), should be "to estimate possible reaction to new proposals and to suggest ways in which they can be interpreted to the public." This requires that the public relations director be familiar with everything that happens in the district and be in attendance at most, if not all, of the work sessions of the board.

Movshovitz also urges board members to work closely with the district's public relations director. She suggests that board members report immediately to that person any information they may have given to the news media on important matters. "The reporter," she writes, "may also be talking to other board members; don't get caught, even inadvertently, supplying contradictory information."

Mullins (1973) contends that no area of press relations causes more problems than giving statements to the press. She suggests one cardinal rule: "Don't say anything at any time that you aren't willing to see in print." She gives this further advice to board members:

> If you are asked to comment on an issue and would rather not, decline in the most positive manner that you can muster, perhaps saying that you have nothing more to add to what has already been said but may have a statement after giving the situation more thorough study. Avoid giving a reporter a brusque "no comment" unless you want to be tagged as uncooperative or, even worse, uninformed. If you do have something to say, go ahead, but remember it's your responsibility — you said it.

The question of whether the press has an axe to grind when covering school affairs is covered by several sources. Ray Smith (1971) feels that most news reporters are not out to "get" administrators or board members. He believes most misquotes or misinterpretations are unintended. Pinnie (1965), on the other hand, cites research implying that a reporter's personal bias may influence the content and slant of stories. He recommends that a "friendly, working relationship with editors and reporters "is vital to overcoming any built-in bias. Pinnie also offers these suggestions when dealing with the news media:

1. Know the policy of each newspaper and consider it when preparing copy for release.
2. Help reporters meet their deadline.
3. Give a calendar of newsworthy school events to the press.
4. Mail agendas of board meetings to the press in advance of the meeting.
5. Call a press conference when an event that is damaging to the school occurs.
6. Alert the press to conditions or situations that might make possible feature stories.
7. Keep dealings with the press honest, sincere, and on a high professional level.
8. Send the press formal invitations to school functions.

Too often board members and other school officials rely exclusively on the print media and forget the electronic media in their news-relations program. Walton (1973) and others urge school systems not to overlook the local broadcast stations when trying to reach their publics with an important message.

One of the best booklets on the subject is *If You Want Air Time*, published by the National Association of Broadcasters. It is offered without charge by NAB member radio and television stations. The booklet offers numerous tips for getting messages on radio and television and invites public service organizations to take advantage of the opportunity. In the booklet, NAB (1970) cites six types of public service programming:

- *Specials:* Interviews, panel or group discussions, demonstrations, etc., in either a series or in a one-time only presentation.
- *Segments:* Similar but shorter presentations inserted as "participating" features of other programs.
- *Spots:* Brief announcements made at various times during a broadcast day.
- *Personality Spots:* Announcements by on-the-air personalities such as disc jockeys, farm directors, or directors of women's features.
- *News Items:* Short stories which are included in regular local newscasts and give briefly the who, what, when, where, and why of a newsworthy event.
- *Editorials:* Statements prepared at the station which present the station management's viewpoint on community programs and projects.

CHAPTER V

Communication Through District Publications

District publications offer school systems ideal media for communicating with their many publics. They are not subject to screening or editing by outside sources as are news releases. They can be sent to limited audiences for specific purposes. They can be produced inexpensively if a district has the inhouse capability and knowledge. And — best of all — they are generally viewed as credible sources of news and information by their readers.

Categories of Publications

Publications fall into three categories: internal, external, and a combination of the two. Bagin, Grazian, and Harrison (1972) list 27 publications that a school district might use effectively.

Internal Publications

- Employee Manual: To acquaint all employees with rules and regulations, district policies, etc.
- Specialized Employee Manual: To familiarize special employee groups — secretaries, bus drivers, etc. — with the requirements of their job.
- New Employee Bulletin: To help new employees adjust to their first weeks on the job.
- Handbook for Substitutes: To inform substitute teachers of the required procedures.
- Telephone Communications Bulletin: To assist secretaries and other employees in dealing with the public on the phone.
- Student Handbook: To acquaint students with school rules and regulations.
- Parent-Teacher Conference Booklet: To show teachers how to conduct a successful conference.
- Resource Center Brochure: To let faculty and staff know what materials are available for their assistance.

- Field Trip Booklet: To provide help to teachers and helping mothers on field trips.
- Board Briefs: To inform faculty and staff of actions taken by the board at its meetings.
- Pay Envelope Stuffer: To provide various informational items to employees when they receive their pay checks.
- Curriculum Idea Exchange Bulletin: To familiarize teachers with successful teaching practices used by other district teachers.
- Communications Guidebook: To inform staff members of the district's communications program and suggest how they might help.
- Article Reprints: To keep employees informed of recent news and feature articles in local news media.

External Publications

- Rumor Control Bulletin: To help quell rumors with facts. Sent to opinion leaders and key communicators.
- Welcome Leaflet: To welcome new residents into the district with school facts and registration procedures.
- Report Card Stuffer: To provide parents with information and special announcements.
- Wallet-Size Calendar: To familiarize residents with important dates and vital school information.
- Recruitment Brochure: To attract high quality faculty and administrators to the district.
- Parent Handbook: To acquaint parents with important school information.
- Guidance Booklet: To suggest to parents how to help children adjust to important educational periods in their lives.
- Curriculum and Special Service Brochure: To explain to residents the various programs offered.
- Work-Study Report: To familiarize prospective employers with the vocational and career oriented programs in the high school or vocational school.
- Special Purpose Publications: To solve specific problems as they arise. This category might include a drug abuse booklet, a brochure on busing, etc.

Internal and External Publications

- Annual Report: To acquaint the board, staff and public with the district's efforts for the year.
- Budget and Bond Issue Publications: To gain public and staff acceptance for budgets and building programs.
- Facts and Figures Booklet: To provide in pocket-size format vital facts about the district.

The authors note that few schools would desire or need all of the publications listed. They also point out that the list is not to be considered as all-inclusive. Most school districts, in fact, publish only a few of the 27 publications listed above.

Planning the Program

Most authorities agree that the key to a good district publications program is planning. NSPRA lists "defining your purpose" as the first item in planning publications. NSPRA notes that a publication will have a clearer focus when "you know what you want it to achieve and what kind of actions or behavior you want to elicit from your readers." The second most important planning item is "defining your audience." Publication planners cannot assume that the needs of all their audiences can be served with a single one-message vehicle.

Other planning activities suggested by NSPRA are as follows: determining your printing format, writing and editing, developing art, planning layout and design, printing, distribution, getting feedback, and evaluating and restructuring.

Quality of Writing and Design

On the subject of writing, most authorities strongly urge school districts to avoid educational jargon and to write in simple, everyday language. The Georgia Department of Education (1971) advises publications editors to "use the language of the commercial magazines," because education publications are competing with these magazines and with newspapers for readers' attention.

Despite all the advice that has been available to school districts in this area, the *Nation's Schools* contest judges found that smaller districts "didn't send in quality publications" ("School Publications" 1972). The judges pointed out to these districts that lack of money doesn't justify poor quality. They suggested that low-budget publications — even mimeographed ones — should be creative in layout and can and should contain interesting copy.

The winning publications, according to the 1972 article, did the following:

- Kept the reader in mind and wrote directly to him, not to the editor, superintendent, school board president, or principal.
- Focused on school children — what they're doing and what's being done for them and to them.
- Did not hesitate to discuss problems and controversial issues.
- Avoided educational jargon, generalities, backslapping, and puff pieces.
- Used additional colors sparingly and tastefully.
- Resisted the temptation to resort to gimmicks that look classy but fail to follow through with an effective message.
- Designed pages that were inviting because they broke up long, gray columns of type with white space and subheads; varied headline size; and used action photos of different sizes.

One of the key publications used by numerous school districts is the newsletter. Johnson (1975) cites the importance of this vehicle in quoting a speech by Rey E. Heibert, dean of the School of Journalism, University of Maryland. "Mass communications," Heibert is quoted as saying, "is out — personal communication is in — and that's what newsletters are." Johnson adds that many school administrators "have found newsletters a fast, inexpensive, personal way to communicate with their diverse audiences — including students."

Schools publish newsletters in two categories: staff newsletters and community newsletters. NSPRA (1971) gives this advice to districts planning to publish staff newsletters:

> What should the staff publication cover? The answer is people, people, people. Remember it's a *staff* publication for people . . . . The publication should report about teachers with new ways to teach, administrators who have good ideas about administration, custodial workers who have found ways to cut costs, or school secretaries who know how to go out of the way to help parents, students, and teachers.
>
> A staff publication should also give space to new board policies, rules, and regulations; programs having to do with curriculum, construction, in-service education, selection of instructional materials, or reduction of vandalism.

A special 1970 publication, titled *"How to Prepare Your Newsletter,* offers these recommendations to editors of community newsletters:

> The very best guide to newsletter content is audience reaction. Find out what kinds of information newsletter readers want and need. Chances are district officials will discover the public wants to know more about what's being taught, why its being taught, and how the performance of teachers and curriculum is measured and evaluated.

The publication suggests that schools design a questionnaire to find out where district residents get their information, what kind of information they get, how they evaluate the information, what kind of information they would like more of, and how the information might best be presented to them.

Another key school district publication is the annual report. Many of these publications, according to "School Publications: Some Leap, Some Limp, and Some Just Lie There" consist of "page after page of wordy program descriptions followed by an interminable number of charts and statistics." The article suggests that annual reports should use short sentences and simple words and should involve the reader in their content. It also recommends that future needs and objectives should be included to at least "give the taxpayer a feeling that considerable thought goes into how his money will be spent."

Communicaid in a 1974 publication titled, *How to Prepare Effective Annual Reports,* makes these recommendations:

- Be candid and complete in explaining all aspects of school life.
- Focus on children, especially when discussing school expenditures.
- Make it easy for readers to find information quickly.
- Discuss problems but also talk about the reasons for the problems and plans for solving them.
- Concentrate on that which is important and omit or downgrade that which is inconsequential.
- Avoid propaganda and back-slapping.
- Give the report as wide a distribution as possible.

General advice in preparing school publications of all types is given by Roux (1973), who advises that a well-designed publication should (1) have a functional design that never permits graphic techniques to interfere with the message, (2) use a layout approach that breaks up long copy to increase readership, and (3) consider the fact that few readers will read everything in a single publication and em-

ploy devices such as headlines, captions under photos, boxes, and so forth, to give a message to the page flippers and skimmers.

Communicating on a Low Budget

How to cut costs in preparing publications is covered by Bagin, Grazian, and Harrison (1972) who suggest that a district can prepare its own camera-ready copy for printing. This would include a paste-up of all materials — headlines, body text, and illustrations. They write:

> Body text can be typed on an electric typewriter with a carbon ribbon and can be either enlarged or reduced photographically to fit the space . . . . Headlines can be put together from sheets of adhesive acetate letters — which are cut out and pasted down — or from sheets of transfer letters — which are applied by pressure. Both types of letters are sold in local art stores.
>
> Lines, rules, borders, arrows, bullets, boxes and so forth can be obtained from rolls of adhesive tape — such as Chartpak — and pasted directly onto the layout. Additional equipment needed to produce camera-ready copy includes a light blue pencil, T-square, triangle, ruler, scissors and rubber cement.

To reduce costs further, the authors suggest that a mimeograph machine be used to run off camera-ready paste-ups. They note that an electronic stencil of the paste-up can be produced at a local business machine company for use on most mimeograph machines.

A number of larger school districts are cutting production costs by setting up their own typesetting and related production capabilities. Brodinsky reports this trend and provides an example from Nancy Nickel of the New Haven Unified School District, Union City, California:

> One of the major means of cutting costs in publications for our school district has been to set up our own printing department. For district newsletters as well as for report cards, letterheads, math workbooks, parent guides, first aid guides, and other items too numerous to mention, we now do all the work ourselves.
>
> Most of these items can be typed on a carbon-ribbon IBM Selectric. We use rub-on letters for headlines and we have hired a printer and purchased an offset press to produce better looking copy at a much smaller cost than we have ever had. Our district newsletter to parents is typeset at a commercial shop and we do the rest, for about half the total cost of previous newsletters. Paper costs less because we order ahead in large quantities.

Movshovitz (1975), who admits that it is difficult to deal in print with specific techniques for publications, gives an excellent word of advice to school districts planning to produce publications: "For those who don't know where to start," she writes, "we suggest that a good first step is to study other publications and analyze what makes them effective or non-effective."

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CHAPTER VI

Obtaining Feedback From the Community

For many years school officials felt little need to consult the community on the question of how the schools should be run. Recently, however, a trend has developed that indicates a formal attempt by more and more schools to gain feedback from the community.

In some states, gaining feedback through public involvement has been mandated by the legislature. California, for example, requires that the community be formally involved in setting goals for the schools. New Jersey requires a plan by which the community can work with the school staff, parents, and pupils "to assess, revise, and interpret the school's goals, policies, program, strengths and needs." Florida dictates that a citizens advisory committee be involved in every school district.

Two-way communication is considered vital for a total communications effort. School communications experts point out that knowledge of what the public is thinking about the schools is imperative if the board and the management team are to make decisions and provide leadership that will work for the community being served. The feedback portion of the two-way communications program provides the backbone of an effective public relations undertaking.

Translated into practical terms, two-way communication is useful in minimizing organized opposition to the schools. Two-way communication usually helps develop broad-based community support and aids in gaining voter approval on school finance questions.

A number of ways are being used to obtain feedback from the community. They are included below.

Citizens Advisory Committee

A publication of NSPRA details the ingredients of one of the most important feedback mechanisms in school communications — the citizens advisory committee. This type of committee, if functioning properly, can produce the kinds of information that tell school officials what the community thinks about the school program and the people who conduct it.

McMillan (1974) outlines guidelines for the school-community advisory council in Flint, Michigan. The mandatory guidelines call for members from many groups: parents, nonparents, teachers, students, and school administrators. According to McMillan, members of organized school and community groups, agencies, businesses, and churches may belong but would not be representing those groups. In 1973 the Flint Board of Education established a citywide citizens advisory committee to facilitate direct communication between the board and representatives from the numerous local school-community advisory councils. The board also established a formal structure to allow representatives of major institutions and agencies to meet with the superintendent and staff on a regular basis. The intent was to develop a structure that would keep some 250 agencies and organizations in close touch with both the Flint citizenry and schools.

Clark and Shoop (1974) caution that particular models need to be evaluated on the basis of practicality. They concur, however, with the Flint guidelines in proposing that advisory council membership be as representative of the community as possible. They caution that council composition should not be based on official organization representation. They point to the danger of leaving out certain institutions or agencies. They also recommend that ad hoc and standing committees complement community advisory councils. These temporary groups cease existing after their goal is attained, for example, working on curriculum, career programs, vocational education, recreation, athletics, public relations, and many other topics.

Pointing to the Flint guidelines as a model for setting goal or work areas for an advisory council, Wood and Martin (1974) advise organizers to consider the social and political forces in the community, the policies of school boards, other community education management groups, the expectations of constituents, the availability of time and resources, and so forth.

The Flint advisory council goals are as follows:

- Improve relations between school and community
- Investigate present use of school facilities
- Plan and develop new facilities
- Develop programs and activities for adults
- Gain a better understanding of the community
- Revise curriculum for relevancy to student needs
- Promote human relations
- Develop process insuring acceptance of individual differences
- Investigate activities designed to stimulate true community feeling

- Work with various agencies and social services
- Participate in annual student conduct and code review

Feedback mechanisms like advisory councils often threaten the power structure. Grieder (1970) warns that certain items should be excluded from advisory council goals. For example, Grieder thinks the subject of negotiations is best left to the negotiations committee. Apart from that, the superintendent's council can work well in most problem areas. A particularly fruitful area involves communication between the central office and certified and classified personnel.

Lloyd (1969), speaking about the Baltimore City Public Schools Advisory Board, details step-by-step procedures for the efficient functioning of an advisory council. He outlines the benefits the Baltimore schools have experienced as a result of the committee's work.

Volunteer service programs, including community school councils, have been discussed by Merachnik (1972), and Kindred (1962).

Key Communicators

Successful feedback techniques involve getting the community involved with the schools in an organized way. The key communicator program is direct-response communication using all the elements of an effective feedback strategy. Bagin (1971) lists the main components of the program.

- Organized strategy (demographic or otherwise) to identify key people in the community who talk to every segment of the public
- Invitations to small (seven or less) informal gatherings of these key community members to discuss school issues with the board, superintendent, or some other official
- Frequent follow-up contacts with the key communicators to dispel rumors, provide budget and bond referenda data, and establish direct-line communications with school administrators.

The feedback advantages of this communications network are the following.

- Key communicators can identify the sparks of dissension before they become raging fires.
- Key communicators can blanket an entire school public with facts and data with minimal effort.
- Key communicators often provide good ideas from knowledgeable and concerned people.
- Key communicator feedback can often provide an instant barometer of community feeling and opinion while formal polls and surveys are being developed.

- Key communicators provide a superb sounding board for important programs before final board and administrative decisions are made.
- Key communicators save more time for school officials than the time it takes to put the program into operation.
- Key communicators often bring together different geographic parts of the community by the nature of their function.

Identifying the Power Structure

Feedback from the key communicator concept relies on the ability to identify the community power structure — at least informally. Lloyd (1969) outlines a personal view on identifying the community power structure. He summarizes his view in four key points:

- Effective communications rest on the ability to identify the power structure.
- It is important to search for the apparent, the stated, and the actual or true motivation of power groups.
- It is important for school people to take seriously the need for action rather than reaction. Under-estimating, over-simplifying, or over-generalizing are important dangers.
- Recognize that society is changing, so public education must change as well.

Volunteer Programs

A rapidly growing program in schools throughout the country is the volunteer program. Many school districts have found that once the community recognizes what the schools are trying to do, members are quick to help. According to a December 1974 publication of the West Chester (Pennsylvania) Schools, *Feedback*, school volunteers logged some 20,000 person hours in 1974.

The New Jersey Schools Boards Association outlines ways to seek more effective involvement of the community in schools. Reinfeld (1968) lists volunteers as one source of many feedback-getting ideas for schools in her compendium of feedback strategies. She also suggests "I Have a Question" cards left in banks, barber shops, libraries, and fast-food stores. People can fill out such cards and mail them to the board or appropriate administrator.

Goal-Setting Programs

Richard Bagin (1973) and Murray (1974) report on an increasingly popular method of involving the community with the schools in a

joint effort to establish common goals and objectives. The key elements of the "goal-setting" program are

- a sample of community volunteers to offer their opinions of what the schools should be teaching and doing
- a systematic process for community and school officials to determine school objectives together
- a prioritizing or ranking system in which the most important aims are given first attention
- a process to determine the status of schools with respect to the achievement of the goals
- a systematic process to communicate the joint conclusions to all interested parties and to begin accomplishing the goals
- agreed-upon ways to communicate final results to all parties (school personnel included)

Some benefits of community involvement in goal-setting include

- community understanding of the role of the school as it sets about designing objectives for education
- community support for goals it had a major share in formulating
- community commitment to educational excellence because of the insight gained during the goal-setting process
- community fulfillment of its responsibility as founder and owner of the schools and their programs
- community feedback on the state of the school's program, its staffing requirements, and its budgetary needs

Phi Delta Kappa has published and distributed a model program or game for community and professional involvement in goal-setting. Goble (1972), Luvern Cunningham (1970), Price (1972), Somwaru (1971), and Lang (1973) all write on the issue of community involvement in school goals and objectives. Murray (1974) discusses community attitudes toward the school after involving the community in determining and ranking educational goals.

Surveys and Polls

Possibly the most direct method for school officials to obtain feedback from their various publics is through surveys and polls. Together with demographic studies, surveys and polls should form part of a school district's two-way flow of communication.

Numerous applications of polls and surveys establish their need as a communications tool. Only with the kind of data and information base provided by a survey can school officials feel comfortable about the impact of planned decisions. Polls can offer information that is helpful in planning bond issue campaigns, closing schools because of decreasing enrollment, or gaining community acceptance for an innovative program.

Various approaches to polling exist, and each has its proponents. The experts, however, caution school officials to ask the question, How precisely do we want to gauge the community's thinking? Frequently, a combination of the personal interview and a mail questionnaire is used.

The personal interview yields a high percentage of representative returns but involves travel costs and the possibility of human error. The telephone interview can be completed in a short time, but a representative sample may not be possible. Mailed questionnaires are cheaper, produce more candid results, and cover larger geographical areas than the others do, but the rate of return is low — often ranging from 10 to 20 percent, and the returns may not be representative of the population.

The National School Public Relations Association publishes a useful handbook, "How to Conduct Low Cost Surveys" (Carithers 1973). Some of the chapter titles indicate the scope of the profile of school survey and polling procedures: "How Do You Reach Your Public," "Test the Questionnaire," "Introduce Yourself to Data Processing," "Sample Selection," "Recruiting and Training Volunteers," "Handling Data," "Reporting the Survey," "How Much Does It Cost?" and "Sample Surveys."

Gallup offers important suggestions on surveying. According to Gallup, probability sampling is superior to quota sampling in order to acquire an effective representative sample. The questionnaire should be carefully tested to ensure that it will obtain required information. The interviewer should be trained in the art of asking questions. The analysis of data should be carefully done to provide a reliable basis for making decisions.

For school officials interested in what taxpayers are reading and what their sources of school information are, Robert Cunningham (1970) offers detailed instructions on readership surveying. Encouraging a continuing feedback program, he advises that the pollster set goals, examine the audience, and pretest the subject matter.

Additional Feedback Techniques

Bagin (1971) lists advisory groups, luncheons, tape recorders (in key locations when the public visits the schools), wallet-size calen-

dars bearing important school meeting dates, a hotline number for instant access to a school official, radio talk shows, and community surveys. These are all important parts of an ongoing program of two-way communication.

He also outlines nine categories of general but important feedback devices. These strategies include small home meetings, community display shows, ground-breaking ceremonies, senior citizen gold cards, parent-teacher conferences, a community resource file of parents and others willing to share their specialized knowledge, lunch-hour briefing sessions, press conferences, radio call-ins, and guidance office evening hours for working parents.

In a how-to-do-it school public relations handbook, Bagin, Grazian, and Harrison (1972) suggest additional feedback devices:

- School administrators can join local service groups. Important things are said at these meetings that are said elsewhere as well.
- Provide tape recorders in public places to get people's ideas on tape.
- Include question and answer sessions at public meetings.
- Have the school switchboard keep a list of common questions. If a large number of people call about one topic, it's time to do a story on that topic for the news media or the newsletter.
- Establish a speakers' bureau. School lectures can bring back audience questions for answer and fact dissemination.
- Include questionnaires in newsletters sent to the public.
- Note questions asked by reporters at news conferences and after board meetings. These questions represent media and community curiosity.
- Hold monthly open forums. Invite all segments of the school and community to attend and ask questions that will make the school better.

CHAPTER VII

Communicating in Times of Crisis and Controversy

"It's late in the evening. Your telephone rings. The caller asks, pleasantly enough, whether you are, indeed, a member of that certain school board.

"You say yes.

"Suddenly the caller is no longer merely a caller. Speaking more loudly as he speeds up his words, he has become a parent, a taxpayer, a voter, who:

"—wonders how you could have been stupid enough to vote the way you did on that recent sex education question;

"—demands that you immediately and summarily fire the teacher who suggested his daughter read 'Catcher in the Rye';

"—wants to know why the schools don't still teach the three Rs as they did before you hired Dr. Blank, who must have canine ancestry."

This fictitious example, offered by Poe (1972), focuses on one area of controversy often experienced by board members today — public criticism of school policies and practices. Add to the mix such crises as teacher strikes, student disturbances, taxpayer revolts, busing and segregation, bomb scares, and vandalism, and you begin to get a clearer picture of the problems that must be dealt with in running schools.

Unfortunately, coping with these problems is no simple task. Referring to the fictitious scenario depicted above, Poe notes that "whatever you answer, assuming you haven't hung up, you're in an argument you can't win." He adds that "creation of controversy is a way of life that Americans believe is guaranteed them by the Constitution, [and] preserved for them by the thousands who have died on the battlefields."

Preventing Flare-ups

Most authorities agree that an effective year-round communications program is necessary to avert crises before they flare up publicly and to dampen them quickly when they do. Movshovitz (1975) argues that, if a board's relationship with the public and the news

media has been good, "the storm will blow over." And Smith (1973) suggests that the working relationship that schools seek with the media "is not made in the midst of crisis. It must be established and continually fostered before the pressure is on."

One way to get this kind of communication, according to Gallagher in his article on community involvement (1971), is to involve citizens who are opinion leaders in the schools. He proposes that these key communicators — who may be barbers and beauticians as well as municipal officials and religious leaders — be kept informed about the schools so that they can answer questions asked by people in the community. When informed in every way possible, he maintains, they will help "overcome an unfavorable press, a vicious rumor, or a misunderstanding in the community."

The need to uncover and treat festering trouble spots before they break out into full-scale infections is considered vital by many experts in dealing with school crises. Too often boards wait until a crisis has occurred to find out what went wrong. Cutlip and Center (1971) warn against this approach:

> Too much effort goes into "fire fighting" rather than "fire prevention." This is dramatized when deteriorating labor relations present the problem of a strike or a lockout or a student sit-in. Such situations usually have long histories. Sometimes neither party knows what caused the blow-up. Heading off "blow-ups" is part of the public relations task. The earlier a complaint is caught, the easier it is to handle. Continuous fact-finding will uncover many problems while they are still small enough to permit quiet handling without a critical public looking on. The same attentive listening will permit the catching of rumors before they become widespread.

Responding to Crises

Despite the best intentions and efforts of boards of education, crises and controversies will continue to occur. When they do, it is necessary for board members to decide whether they should be handled by administrative decision or board action. Anderson (1974) suggests that the board first consider whether or not the problem is covered by school policy. If it is not, then board action is required. He also urges boards to anticipate as many crisis situations as possible in district policy, because "the more crises it has considered beforehand, the fewer will be the types of confrontations which result in fearsome publicity and a rush to action."

Henry, in *Work Stoppage Strategies* (AASA, 1975), recommends that all districts in the nation need to develop solid and effective

crisis communication plans, particularly in the area of employee strikes.

When a crisis does occur, Anderson offers a three-step approach for dealing with it:

- Gathering information
- Creating an open atmosphere of investigation
- Making a decision

The first step, according to Anderson, might consist of hiring a private investigator, using the resources of local colleges and universities, calling witnesses to give testimony under oath, bringing in students for opinions or testimony, and even involving the public. He contends that there are no limits to the fact-finding stage but warns board members to refrain from drawing conclusions and from issuing statements to the press individually during this phase.

The second step, which he considers extremely important, involves keeping the public abreast of all happenings. He advises that public hearings be held whenever possible. "If this is not possible," he adds, "then the public should be kept informed of the testimony and the depth of the board investigation."

Trying to conceal what is going on, he cautions, will only result in an incensed public clamoring to know more. And he adds,

> Special efforts should (also) be made to keep the management team abreast of data so that they may transmit this information throughout the entire system. Even the students, particularly in high schools, should be told of the progress of the investigation. If this idea seems untoward, consider the results if, after two months study and investigation, you suddenly make an announcement. You will find yourself in the position of having to answer the public anyway; why not involve them along the way?

When a decision is made — the third step in the process — Anderson recommends that it be circulated to the public. He also advises that the results of the decision be monitored and evaluated.

Other writers also recommend openness and candor in dealing with the public during a crisis. However, both Movshovitz (1975) and Goble in his article on community involvement (1972) urge that only one person be allowed to speak for the board when a crisis occurs. According to Movshovitz, "this is one time, particularly, when school board members should forego their right to speak as individuals." If board members conduct private press conferences and issue individual statements to the media, she argues, they are bound to get into trouble.

Whether to take an offensive or defensive role regarding crisis communication is covered by Smith (1973), who recommends that

"schools take the initiative, provide the leadership, and attempt to lead the crisis in an objective direction."

A defensive role, according to Smith, puts schools in a position where they have to play "catch-up ball" and often results in disaster. With the offensive choice, he argues that

> . . . the schools are in a better position to convey factual information, clarify the issues, and lead the crisis dialogue. Controversy and its accompanying crises are not all bad; they can provide communities and schools with an opportunity to exchange views, resolve issues openly, and possibly be stronger because of controversy.

When a crisis hits a school district, Smith urges that the district inform the news media of the problem before the media get wind of the situation. He also suggests that a carefully written fact sheet, which includes a possible solution, be prepared and distributed to news personnel and that a designated spokesman be made available for comments throughout the controversy. He warns, however, that the spokesman should confine all comments to the facts of the issue.

Management of Strikes

In dealing with crisis situations arising out of the collective bargaining process (impasse, fact-finding, strikes, etc.), Henry writes that it is mandatory for boards to have pre-adopted communication plans and strategies to put into operation. It is too late to begin to think about such operations when the crisis has hit, Henry says.

A detailed and thorough plan must be developed in conjunction with key administrators in the district and with the board of education members months before the crisis. And, such plans must be updated at least yearly. Each has a role to play in a work stoppage situation and all must know what their individual and collective role is to be when the crisis erupts.

Savitt offers these guidelines in planning effective communication for impasses or strikes:

- Inform the community of status of negotiations
- Anticipate parent reaction and tentative plans to cope with such reaction
- Make plans for continuing contact with community during strike
- Anticipate student reaction and tentative plans to cope with such reaction
- Make plans for strike management headquarters (not in superintendent's office)

- Plan for special switchboard service
- Plan system of regular communication with building principals and board
- Prepare several sets of addressed envelopes to be sent to employees during strike
- Establish plans for keeping detailed log of activities during strike, including votes, etc.
- Establish tentative plan for keeping communications lines open to striking organizations
- Establish procedure for getting phone approval from board on urgent decisions
- Make plans for handling of press releases and dealing with media, including television

The role of individual board members during a strike is a critical one. The Pennsylvania School Boards Association (1974) advises board members to recognize that day-to-day labor-management relations are administrative concerns. It urges members to publicly reflect confidence in administrative leadership and to question in private any decisions made by the administration. It also advises them to maintain contact with their constituents, to keep in touch with the superintendent, and never to let emotional reactions take over or to attempt to fight back through the media.

Dealing with Critics and Student Disruptions

Dealing with critics is another area of concern that must be approached skillfully to avoid a full-scale crisis. Rovner (1974) has identified four types that boards must contend with: hostile critics, uninformed critics, professional critics, and enlightened critics. Regardless of the type, he maintains, many crisis situations can be avoided if districts are willing to meet with critics. Such a meeting can be mutually beneficial, he adds, only "if the critics are respected, listened to, and answered honestly."

Poe (1972) notes that the most vexing type of critics are the angry ones who have organized into a group. These are the ones, he says, who "have obtained countless names on a petition, have been making statements to the local newspaper, and now are ready for their next tactic," putting pressure on vulnerable board members — those that the group feels "can be coerced into pushing the group's point of view to a predetermined conclusion." For use when these critics descend on a board meeting to pursue their cause, he offers this advice:

> Sometimes it requires the strongest of wills to resist these groups — and to remember that action taken hastily by a board

and in response to pressure is out of perspective and usually unwise.

In dealing with student disruptions, schools are advised by Bowman (1971) to come up with alternative programs and by Stoops (1970) to devise ways to make the programs more relevant. Stoops also advises districts to open up communication channels among students, faculty, and administration with a continuing dialogue over important problems. And Bagin, Grazian, and Harrison (1972) recommend that school officials — including board members — make the rounds of homerooms to learn what students are concerned about.

They also suggest that districts form a student school board to improve student-district communications. Their proposal would work in this manner:

> Students are elected by other students, and they consider areas of concern to their peers. They study student needs and learn about how a school is supported in the process. They make recommendations to the school board and meet with the board to hear the board's reactions to their recommendations. In addition to improving communication, this involvement helps students to become more knowledgeable voters on school issues.

Relations with the Media

Regardless of the type of crisis or controversy, boards and the administration must deal with the media when the problem has public relations implications. Smith (1973) offers guidelines that should prove helpful in improving media communications:

Before a Crisis

- Have a well defined crisis communication plan, with channels of responsibility clearly stated.
- Be sure media people know the district spokesperson, and the district should know the news representatives.
- A well established reputation for dealing honestly and fairly with the media pays big dividends in a crisis.
- Your crisis plan should have an information gathering network and a central collection point.

During a Crisis

- Gather facts, prepare materials and take the initiative with media representatives (you have greater credibility by going to them rather than waiting for them to come to you).

- Don't take a definite position on an issue until facts are all collected; in the meantime, be willing to share information.
- Be willing to admit you don't have all the answers but are committed to work for the solutions.
- Any released statements (for newspapers, radio, or television) should be written and then carefully read in an interview. An impromptu, ad lib comment to a newsman can be most embarrassing.
- Avoid getting emotionally involved in the crisis issue; contain yourself to the facts and policy.
- Leave the prognostication of the issue to others.

After the Crisis

- Evaluate your crisis communication plan with staff, board, and news representatives and make needed changes.
- Extend thanks to news representatives for their cooperation during the crisis (however, don't publicly rap media people, who you felt put the screws to you).
- Get some rest, have a few drinks, and get ready to go around again.

CHAPTER VIII

Obtaining Information from the Administration and Other Sources

While the school board has an obligation to inform the public and to inform the district's internal audiences (staff and students), it also has the obligation and need to *be* informed. We have already spoken of some devices that both the board and administration might use to obtain feedback from the community and the schools — key communicators, advisory committees, surveys, etc. But the board also must be able to turn to other sources for information.

The board is often in the position of having to make important policy decisions and to set goals and priorities that can affect the future development and direction of education for the district. One hopes that a board faced with such monumental tasks would have at its disposal all of the necessary data and evidence on which to base its deliberations and decisions. Alas, it is often true that the board does not have all of the needed resource materials.

Major Problems

The board may face three major problems when trying to obtain all pertinent data and evidence pertaining to an issue:

1. It has no staff of its own to conduct research and gather information.

2. The administration may also lack the necessary staff for the compilation of reports, opinions, etc. needed by the board.

3. The administration may collect and report to the board only the research evidence that supports a position favored by the administration and staff.

The board's difficulty sometimes in obtaining *all* evidence and opinions needed for decision-making is described by The Center for Urban Education (1968) in connection with an issue facing the New York City Board of Education in the late sixties:

> The lay board, then, has the difficult responsibility for making policy and being accountable for its implementation,

while at the same time not having the resources to do either very well. Its policy decisions are dependent on studies and evaluations provided by headquarters technicians, many of whom want to protect their own interests and careers and are hesitant to incur the wrath of supervisory groups. In cases where the board's policy statements and programs may seem to the headquarters and field staff to be too advanced, they can be watered down or subverted in their implementation. And since the board does not have its own staff to monitor the carrying out of various programs and knows so little about local conditions, it must rely upon the professionals inside the system. Finally, evaulations of programs were, until very recently, done by insiders. The system, for the most part, is locked in and self-reinforcing at every turn. It is the superintendent and his staff who actually make policy. They have all the research staff, all the data, and much of the expertise. Yet, they often have a vested interest in maintaining the system the way it is. Their initial advice to the board regarding the feasibility of particular new programs is likely to be replete with judgements about their many costs, and with the judgements presented as facts.

The difficulties described above are not the New York City board's alone, of course. Gittell (1971) says that the "weakness or ineffectuality of the boards of education in American cities is often attributed to this lack of staff and to the limited time available to board members as part-time unsalaried officials." She goes on to say,

> The potential for conflict between the superintendent and top supervisory personnel and the board of education is ever present. The professionals are naturally jealous of their expertise and resent interference by a lay board in areas they perceive as technical. However, these areas may include most aspects of school policy making. The board, on the other hand, can hardly compete with the accumulated knowledge and advantage of the full-time role of the professional staff. Therefore, the usual distinction between policy and implementation is virtually impossible to achieve in practice. Generally the staff can, with its highly effective resources, direct and influence policy more successfully than the school board.

Both The Center for Urban Education and Gittell tend to ascribe to the chief administrator and his staff intentions that are not altogether in the best interests of the board or, for that matter, of the school system. In all fairness to school administrators, there are probably few who intentionally set out to withhold important infor-

mation from the board or to sabotage the policy decisions of the board.

But there seems to be little question that a board of education that must rely almost exclusively on the superintendent as the conduit for information and as the idea generator is in a difficult position. Of course, it can be argued that the superintendent also is in a difficult position in most districts. In the great majority of districts the superintendent has little or no staff to call upon for research, collection and interpretation of data, and sorting out of ideas and evidence. He may be the board's sole source of information on most issues, but he may wish mightily that he wasn't.

Should the Board Have Its Own Research Staff?

What is the board to do if it wants and needs more and more varied information and opinions than the administration is able or willing to provide? Again, we are talking about the collection of research data and other evidence and expert opinion from sources other than the community and the staff. We are talking about the board's ability to acquire and profit from information produced by a vast array of agencies, institutions, and individuals outside the district — and outside the county and state.

"The school boards association is going to have to get into research to assist local boards," said Ruth Page, former executive director of the New Jersey School Boards Association, in a speech to that organization's annual workshop in 1973. "Today, the board is in the position of having to accept most of the information submitted to it by other sources such as the superintendent. It needs additional information in order to have other points of view or to affirm a point of view." Mrs. Page and others advocating an increased flow of diverse information to the board do not intend that the superintendent be cut out as a major source of information and close educational advisor. They merely suggest that the board — and probably the administration — needs more sources.

Mrs. Page suggests that state — and perhaps county and regional — associations of school boards provide local boards with research data and opinions that can be examined, digested, and debated when the board is considering major decisions and weighing different options. This is already being done to a degree, but Mrs. Page believes the associations will have to beef up this capability so they are able on request to supply a board, for example, with information and a list of additional resources on how other districts have dealt with the challenge of declining enrollment.

Some boards have created their own research staffs, sometimes when there is no real authority to do so or where it is even contrary to existing law. The Center for Urban Education, for example, reports that the New York City Board of Education in the sixties set up its own committees and even hired a full-time researcher with a staff under him. "The lay board has attempted in an informal way to do what it has been prevented from doing formally," says the center. "It has worked with various consultants who serve at the board's pleasure, despite objections from the board of examiners and other inside professionals. Nevertheless, it is cautious about further expanding its staff, because such a move would require a change in state education laws."

As previously stated, The Center for Urban Education tends to see the board and the administration as competitors at best and adversaries at worst. This need not be so, of course. There seems to be no reason why the board cannot gather information on its own and from the administration as well without incurring the superintendent's wrath and without in any way casting the administration and professional staff in a bad light.

The idea of school boards having their own staffs has not been received well by many persons, however, and that includes board members. William E. Dickinson (1969) reports that a brainstorming session sponsored that year by the NSBA "considered — and just about rejected out of hand — the idea that school boards should have investigatory staffs of their own, administrative aides who would be answerable to the board directly and not to the superintendent."

But The Ford Foundation (1969) finds that "without exception, members of the big city boards of education believed their board needed its own staff." Referring to the comments of one city board member interviewed for its study, the foundation's report states that the person "agreed with the need for experts on a board staff who can review the budget presented by the professional educators and advise the board." Two other board members quoted said the board staff "should be more of a resource and research staff, while the superintendent and his staff are primarily responsible for implementation and operations."

Gerard Sroufe, then executive director of the National Committee for Support of the Public Schools, is quoted in the foundation's report as saying that there should be no reason why a competent superintendent should feel threatened by a board staff. "A good superintendent doing his job well should not feel jeopardized by a board staff which advises independently and objectively," said Sroufe.

On the subject of board staffs, the report concludes

> While the idea of separate staffs has been most urged by big city board members, it would seem to be a good and feasible idea for smaller districts. Perhaps very small districts could avail themselves of board staff personnel assigned out of a county or regional office on a priority need basis.

There is the possibility, of course, of the board's using part-time researchers. These could be college or high school students acting as interns. The students, for example, could be given an issue to research. Suppose the board was considering a new policy governing student dress in the schools. The students might review policies obtained from other districts, court decisions affecting dress codes, articles written on the subject in professional and consumer publications, and state regulations. The results of their efforts could be made available to board members and also to the administration.

An article in *Education Wire* reported that the Worcester, Mass., Board of Education was using student interns supplied by a private educational program called Dynamy ("Large Charge of Dynamy Jolts Seniors out of Blahs" 1972). The students, aged 16 through 20, conducted "routine research and collected data for board members," working under the guidance of Dynamy counselors.

Many school boards now have standing or ad hoc committees, but these committees are not always designed to collect information and report it back to the board for deliberation in connection with the decision-making — or legislative — process. Martin and Harrison (1972) talk about a new kind of board, called an education assembly, in which committees would have functions more analogous to committees of a state legislature:

> The Education Assembly would be organized into standing and ad hoc committees which would conduct hearings to determine the community's needs; take expert testimony; publish staff reports detailing alternative ways of reaching an educational goal; analyze the merits, demerits, and costs of each of the alternatives; and convert best judgement into appropriate legislation. As standard procedure, all legislation establishing new programs would require a preliminary evaluation of the new programs within 90 days of inauguration, and an annual audit.

Board committees so constituted would, of course, be a means of obtaining information on which the board could base decisions. Assume, for example, that a board is debating a policy on athletics and recreation. The board might want to establish an ad hoc committee that could take testimony from such persons as school athletic direc-

tors, community recreation officials, children, representatives of local booster clubs, and others who could contribute a point of view worth the board's consideration.

At a recent state meeting of school board members, someone suggested that the board or administration or both keep up-to-date files on subjects that might be the cause of controversy in the district or might eventually require the board and administration to make decisions and chart new directions. Such files would include newspaper clippings, clippings from professional journals and other magazines, copies of appropriate speeches, copies of reports, and so on.

There might be files on such topics as revenue, discipline, vandalism, negotiations, and various curriculum areas. Secretaries, student interns, or parent volunteers could easily be employed part time to clip articles and process other materials contributed by board members and professional staff members.

Not only would well-kept files of information be good resources for board members and administrators to consult on occasion, but such files also could be used as background for articles the school district develops for its own newsletters and for speeches given by board members and administrators.

Other Information Resources

What are some other means by which board members can obtain the kinds of data that could help in the decision-making process? The Ford Foundation report talks about board members' use of tape cassettes that contain learned discussions on very important topics.

The reaction of board members was positive "to the proposition that great ideas and great issues in education might be discussed on tape by the most knowledgeable people available and the tape slipped into a cassette player by a board member at work or at home," said the report. "Most [board members] thought it would help satisfy the demand expressed . . . for discussion of weighty topics in depth by people who know what they are talking about." One board member interviewed for the Ford Foundation study reported that he had stopped going to most state and regional meetings of educators because most of the speakers were hardly more knowledgeable than he was.

When it comes to the kinds of written materials that board members must rely on for information, the Ford Foundation report said that most board members interviewed "seem unhappy over the current output of written materials directed at them. One of the most frequent criticisms was that articles are often superficial in content and do not thoroughly explore the most exciting ideas and the most pressing problems."

Board members complained about the great amount of written materials they must sift through in an effort to keep up with what's going on. The report offered this suggestion:

> What might be helpful is a four-page monthly bulletin debating innovative ideas and the hard issues of the moment and of tomorrow. Each monthly bulletin might deal only with one idea or one issue, but it would be examined from all sides by people who have something to say.

The Ford Foundation study thought boards around the country might get information and new insights on important matters through a two-way telephone system similar to one established by the Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB). The report described the system as follows:

> Several years ago, the Extension Division of the University of Wisconsin opened a telephone network statewide. There are approximately 100 stations (a county courthouse, town hall, YMCA, etc.) where there is a telephone desk speaker and a standard receiver. WASB has been able to use the network for $40 an hour to communicate with board members throughout the state. This is the way the WASB program works: Board members are notified well in advance that on a particular night authorities in a certain subject will be talking and answering questions over the telephone network. Interested board members then go to the nearest station at the appointed hour. The presentation is made from Madison, with board members listening to the desk speaker. When it's time for questions, the moderator in Madison calls the roll of stations. As many questions are fielded as possible. All persons on the circuit can, of course, hear both questions and answers.

Perhaps the information crisis experienced by board members would not be nearly so severe if they were aware and could make full use of some already existing information channels. One such resource educators sometimes overlook is the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) operated by the National Institute of Education.

ERIC has 16 clearinghouses locatsed throughout the country that collect and analyze research reports and other information in their specialized areas. For less than $100 a year a school district can subscribe to two monthly catalogs that give access to this information; one presents brief resumes of research reports, and the other is an index to journal articles.

Another useful ERIC service is the publications issued by the various clearinghouses. Many of these publications provide highly prac-

tical summaries and analyses of literature that help school officials keep up to date on research findings and trends in school practices. One example of this service is the School Leadership Digest, a series of monthly reports prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management for publication by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Educators who subscribe to the digest receive each month a 32-page highly readable summary of all the relevant information available on a particular topic. Some of the topics covered so far are year-round schools, middle schools, class size, community schools, paraprofessionals, playground facilities and equipment, women and minorities in administration, and vandalism prevention.

Board members are busy people — busy both with board business and also in most cases with other careers. It is difficult for them, therefore, to search out and absorb all the data that might be necessary to their functioning as decision-makers. But it also seems that most board members are looking for new and better means of gathering objective information and evidence. These ideas may be helpful in meeting that honest desire and need to be fully informed.

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